

Daily Herald, December 22, 2008

Opportunities like the one Kristine Boteva earned are the reason her family moved from Bulgaria to become U.S. citizens.

The 18-year-old Hoffman Estates High School senior recently visited the White House where she mingled with 300 fellow artists whose Christmas ornaments were selected to hang from the 18-foot-tall White House Christmas tree. She even heard a speech from first lady Laura Bush.

"She told us what a great honor it was," Boteva recalls of the speech last month.

Just days later, Boteva's mom, dad and brother stood proudly before a judge in Chicago and were sworn in as U.S. citizens. Kristine will do the same once the family saves up enough to make her application.

The two events - Kristine's trip to the White House and her family's U.S. citizenship - are like a dream come true for the hardworking immigrant family.

Kristine's winning ornament took her days to decorate with acrylic paints. With help from her Advanced Placement Drawing teacher, Cynthia Surtz, Boteva decided Abraham Lincoln would be a fitting theme to represent Illinois. She painted his face on the front of the 8-inch plastic sphere and one of his famous quotes on the back. Congressman Mark Kirk's office had contacted Surtz earlier looking for artists.

"We thought Lincoln was perfect," Surtz said.

The extraordinary trip almost didn't happen.

Boteva received the invitation through a phone call just 24 hours before the White House reception.

On such short notice, the price of a plane ticket was as high as \$700. The expense was especially difficult for Boteva's family, which has been hit hard by the recession. Her father, Angel, has been laid off twice in recent months. He currently works as a trucker.

But they decided to dip into their bank accounts. Boteva recalled her mother's words:

"We'll find a way to go; this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Margarita Boteva said.

Hunting around on the Web, they found \$400 airfares. They flew out of O'Hare International Airport at 4 a.m. Dec. 2 for the reception that same evening. And they stayed with family friends while there.

The White House trip was the perfect prelude to the Botevs long-scheduled Dec. 7 date at the Daley Center in Chicago where Boteva's mother, father and 9-year-old brother were to be sworn in as American citizens. They had waited more than five years living in the country to establish residency to apply.

"It was just so special," Kristine Boteva said of watching the swearing-in ceremony.

Boteva, born in Pazardjic, Bulgaria, will wait a couple months before she takes the oath herself. An application for naturalization costs \$675. So she will wait until the family saves a little more money.

Kristine's small ornament has come to represent the culmination of her family's dream. A native of Peshtera, Bulgaria, Kristine's mother speaks little English, but it's easy to see how she beams

with pride over her daughter's accomplishments.

"It's like a dream that we never thought could have happened," Boteva translated for her mother.

Boteva's mother said having a U.S. passport makes her feel the country cares about her, being so far away from her native land. "She also feels like she's more protected now," Kristine Boteva said of her mom, who works as a caregiver for senior citizens in Niles.

The family first lived in Schiller Park, sharing a home with friends. Two years ago they got their own home in Hanover Park.

Surtz said Boteva isn't the first Hoffman Estates student with art displayed in Washington, D.C., as five have earned Congressional awards since 2006, most recently students Kirsten Hanson and Justin Simanis.

Most of Boteva's time recently has been spent working on a scholarship application for the American Academy of Art in Chicago, where she hopes to attend in the fall.

She says she's aware of the opportunities that come with living in America. "And my parents remind me," Boteva said.

As for the White House ornament, Boteva says using Honest Abe was an easy choice, given that 2008 marked his 200th birthday.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines